

ECO-HUMANISM TO MAKE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN*

Novita Dewi

novitadewi@usd.ac.id

The Graduate Programme in English Language Studies,
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract: In this market-driven global knowledge-based economy, university has a role to reduce the sinister side of globalization. Mindful of the fact that university is incarnated in social reality be it economic, political or cultural, what makes Christian university Christian is its continual commitment to serve the Kingdom of God that is manifested in siding with the poor and the marginalized. Dialogue with the local culture is one attempt to embrace glocalization understood as a dynamic, vibrant two-way traffic, i.e. localize the global and globalize the local. On the one hand, it involves expanding the limits of nationality while at the same time make such local ideas, best-practices, values and wisdom global. On the other hand, glocalization is to encompass worldwide developments in all aspects of life into the local setting. The challenge of Christian university now is to locate its intellectual endeavors within the humanistic principles; and the new-humanism today is eco-humanism. Not until we address the poor being a social reality can we speak of eco-justice with which university can duly enlighten by means of teaching, research, publication and community outreach.

Key words: education for equity, option for the poor, eco-humanism

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?

* Invited Paper delivered at the ACUCA Management Conference “Dialogue with the Cultures: Implementing Values Education in the Multicultural Asia” on October 22 – 24, 2015, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

We live in a globalizing world where things are moving sideways and where, Zygmunt Bauman says, “forms of life settle aside each other, clash and mix, crowd together in the same space/time...” As a result, our lives depend on each other. Whatever we do or do not do will affect the lives of people who live in places we will, perhaps, never visit. Indeed, in this rapidly evolving world, diversity, plurality, hybridity, multiculturalism has become the buzz words of today. The theme of this conference is “Dialogue with the Cultures: Implementing Values Education in the Multicultural Asia”. To begin with, it is worthwhile to be somewhat careful in defining what “multiculturalism” is.

In his *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Bauman construes multiculturalism as, to quote at length, “a socially conservative force. Its achievement is the transformation of social inequality, a phenomenon highly unlikely to win general approval, into the guise of ‘cultural diversity’, that is to say, a phenomenon deserving of universal respect and careful cultivation.” Not long ago, Bauman also wrote one week after the shooting incident in Paris at the office of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 where 11 people were killed and 11 others injured. The gunmen, we are told, were no other than members of Al-Qaeda’s linked fundamentalist group. In Bauman’s view, radicalism grows increasingly well today because of the continuing spread of the diaspora. World migration results in people’s discomfort with the strangers. Unlike virtual contact, close physical proximity with people whom we hardly know is somehow frightening. People become suspicious of each other and feel threatened by the presence of the Other.

However, what is more interesting in his article to the present discussion is Bauman’s doubts about the meaning of multiculturalism today when quoting Stanley Fish’s idea of “boutique multiculturalism”, i.e. superficial fascination with the Other as in eating ethnic food, celebrating local festivals, and all kinds of flirtations with the Other. In Bauman’s view, this superficial, shallow type of multiculturalism may appreciate, enjoy, sympathize with, and recognize the rightfulness of cultures other than their own, but they often fail to respect the core values of the culture being tolerated. As cautioned by Bauman, multiculturalism in the global age may pose different challenges because it does not always imply co-existence. Things are still conceived in binary opposition: “us” and “them”, “superior” and “inferior”, “moral” and “corrupt”, etc. As it is, multiculturalism should be understood herein in “traditional” way, i.e. capacity to respect and respond to cultural diversity. It

is a way of life built on tolerance and admiration of each other's distinct culture. Communalities and differences should be addressed in a meaningful way.

Dialogue is indeed one way to bring together distinctive voices, assemble and amplify them to produce a sweet, pleasant and harmonious melody. Dialogue with the local culture is an attempt to embrace global connectivity through the so-called "glocalization". The genesis of this term, according to Khondker, is a Japanese word that the American sociologist Roland Robertson learned from the marketing experts when selling Japanese-made products to be firstly attuned to meet the local taste and interests before reaching the global market. Thus, glocalization here is understood as a dynamic process. It is a vibrant two-way traffic to localize the global and globalize the local. On the one hand, it involves expanding the limits of nationality while at the same time make such local ideas, best-practices, values and wisdom global. On the other hand, glocalization is to encompass worldwide developments in all aspects of life into the local setting.

Dialogue with local culture is also a way to prevent indulgence to the boutique multiculturalism mentioned earlier. Here, it is critical multiculturalism that becomes the common pursuit. Respect and recognition of local culture by means of dialogue will lessen the sinister side of globalization that acts like, to borrow Khondker, "a brakeless train crushing everything in its path". Glocalization conversely provides ways to board the very train named modernization. The challenge today for Christian universities in the Asian region is to safely board the train whilst contributing our distinct voices through humanistic education to which we now turn.

HUMANISTIC EDUCATION FOR EQUITY

In this market-driven global knowledge-based economy, university has a role to reduce the worldwide greed for profit that dehumanizes values education. Mindful of the fact that the birth of university is contingent to social reality be it economic, political or cultural, what makes Christian university Christian is its continual commitment to serve the Kingdom of God that is manifested in siding with the poor and the marginalized. Thus, for-profit university is impracticably unsound. It is conflicting with Christian values. Lamentably, Christian universities are putatively known as being expensive. (But this is, of course, another issue deserves separate discussion.)

To recall a fairly distant history of a university, in his Commencement Address at Santa Clara University, California, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. had reminded us about the task of a Christian university, before he was brutally murdered with five other Jesuits and two women colleagues in his home university, the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador on November 16, 1989. The Jesuit philosopher, scholar, and martyred university president has this to say:

A Christian university must take into account the gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor will study at the university; it does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence~excellence which is needed in order to solve complex social issues of our time. What it does mean is that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those without science; to provide skills for those without skills; to be a voice for those without voices; to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to make their rights legitimate.

Christian university is the one that places itself at the service of the Kingdom of God, using as it does, option for the poor as the stance. Especially in Asia, the fact that university is incarnated in social reality can be easily disincarnated because the majority of people are poor and marginalized. What role can Christian universities play amidst the global economic growth and its commercialism? Here, the famous, sought-after-Christian universities can easily become a prime candidate to succumb to the sin of materialism. Education in the marketplace poses a real threat to the democratic methods.

Apparently, elitism in higher education is inevitable. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Martha Nussbaum laments the erosion of democracy as education today is economic growth-driven. She claims that critical thinking, imagination, and empathy are lost to training, information acquisition and basic skills to compete in business and employment. Consequently, humanities studies such as arts and literature are neglected. To illustrate, in the U.K. grants are provided largely for STEM subjects. In the U.S. English Department is no longer popular, if not to say declining because of the scarcity of research funding. Giant multinational companies hurriedly support professors who are willing to sell their patents rather than publishing their research findings. In Indonesia, to compare with, the presence of sister-universities and partnership with Western universities exclusively open job-promising departments like business,

computer science, engineering, etc. Nussbaum concludes her book with a rather daunting tone:

Democracies have great rational and imaginative powers. They also are prone to some serious flaws in reasoning, to parochialism, haste, sloppiness, selfishness, narrowness of the spirit. Education based mainly on profitability in the global market magnifies these deficiencies, producing a greedy obtuseness and a technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy itself, and that certainly impede the creation of a decent world culture.

Humanities studies help broaden imagination, compassion and self-examination which have all shaped the co-existence of what Nussbaum called “citizens in an interlocking world”. Nowadays, technology allows us to sophisticate global communication. But, what kind of communication does it have to offer? Internet communication can intimate and eliminate relationships in one click away. World citizens need to have a deeper communication to survive with which humanistic education can contribute.

Both Ellacuría’s and Nussbaum’s views about humanistic education and the role of university resonate with that of inspiring local scholars and gurus I am fortunate to meet in my life. Their insights help enlighten the present discussion. The first is Dr. J. Bismoko, the former Vice Rector of Academic Affairs of Sanata Dharma University, who has the same interest with mine in language education. Dr. Bismoko claims that the study of English in non-English-speaking countries today should be essentially comparative and expression of local culture. In his opinion, “Doing research in English studies the classicist way today, including research in English literature, may represent an opportunity loss or even regression”. For him, education is a means to make individuals truly autonomous, self-fulfilled and emancipated. The second person that has continued shaping my conviction about education is the former Rector of Sanata Dharma University, Prof. M. Sastrapratedja, S.J., who persistently says that education is to humanize human person anew. As such, education is to overcome our human capacity by making use of our human potentials to the fullest in order to become superiorly humane without being trapped into inhumanity. Father Sastrapratedja was recently awarded Penghargaan Unika Soegijapranata 2015 from the university he served in 1989 – 1993. In his keynote address he says that the challenge of Christian university now is to locate its intellectual endeavors within the humanistic principles; and the new-humanism today is eco-humanism. The recently release of the Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter on

Ecology has helped us assured that abuse to nature is but human abuse; and that environmental abuse mostly aggrieved the deprived and the marginalized part of the society. Not until we address the poor being a social reality can we speak of eco-justice with which university can duly enlighten by means of teaching, research, publication and community outreach. For example, ecological knowledge is to be inserted the curriculum to address the environmental damage as the price that modern technology has to pay. Here, local wisdom contributes significantly to environmental protection, but often ignored in Western science and knowledge production.

Values education in Christian universities, therefore, should make both global and local knowledge and culture stand on equal footing. They should enmesh and enrich each other. Dialogue slows down what Bauman fears about show-cased, exoticized multiculturalism mentioned in the beginning of this paper. To quote Bauman again, "In a world of global dependencies with no corresponding global polity and few tools of global justice, the rich of the world are free to pursue their own interests while paying no attention to the rest." Critical multiculturalism that recognizes and respects all culture will foster human understandings in the creation of compassionate global citizenship.

Finally, allow me to show how dialogue with local culture can take place. Although written in Javanese, Sindhunata's poem "Ngelmu Pring" or bamboo philosophy is ecologically inclined. Using ecofeminism, Andalas discussed the poem claiming that such non-human creation as bamboo tree helps us see the presence of God among us whereby women mostly partake and make a full use of the bamboo. Bamboo products for household needs like woven basket, winnow, floorcovering, fan, etc. are useful. Through bamboo, among multitude of others, God continues to provide. Human beings, likewise, need to provide networks with other creatures to co-exist. In Asian context, bamboo is but a life-giving tree. From cradle to grave, Sindhunata says, our life is intimately linked to bamboo. What a lesson in life we can learn from the wisdom of local culture.

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